

EDUCATION WEEK

## SPOTLIGHT

## On Instructional Coaching

**Editor's Note:** Instructional coaches can play a key role in schools, helping teachers in the classroom while planning and strategizing with school leaders. This Spotlight looks at districts that are turning teachers into coaches and examines some of the primary practices and tips needed for effective coaching.

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# Instructional Coach Jumps Into New Standards



JARED SOARES FOR EDUCATION WEEK

By Catherine Gewertz

**S**arah Hawley immersed herself in urban teaching as soon as she graduated from college in 2000. It didn't take her long to conclude that she'd found her professional home.

Having grown up outside Toledo, Ohio, and studied K-8 education at the University of Toledo, she found it natural to apply for her first teaching job in that city's school system. While earning a master's degree in school leadership and administration, she taught 7th and 8th grade English/language arts for six years and spent a year teaching middle school science there as well.

**Sarah Hawley is an instructional coach at Stuart-Hobson Middle School in Washington. She has spent 13 years teaching; this is her first year as a coach.**

But the district's fiscal instability wore on her. Tired of being laid off and rehired at the last minute, and moved between grades and subjects, she made the leap to the charter school sector.

Ms. Hawley joined the staff of a charter school startup as a 4th grade teacher. Life at the small school was hectic, however, with everyone wearing many hats and working long hours. As a seven-year veteran, she had more experience than most of her fellow teachers—and the principal—so she ended up assuming broad responsibilities beyond teaching her own students. She was exhausted, but learned a lot, including getting a clearer sense of how she might fit into the education world.

"I saw that I could make my school the kind of place where students could learn," she recalls. "I felt ready to leave the classroom by then, and I was starting to think about moving more into some kind of leadership role."

When her partner moved to Maryland, she followed him, taking a teaching job in a K-8 building in the struggling Prince George's County district. In 2011-12, her second year there, Ms. Hawley became team leader for grades 6, 7, and 8, working closely with the assistant principal and serving on the school's common-core-implementation team.

In that role, she helped design grading guidelines for teachers to help them judge writing assignments aligned to the new standards, and she trained fellow teachers in using the guidelines.

When Ms. Hawley heard that the District of Columbia was hiring instructional coaches, she applied for and got one of those jobs. In June 2012, her training began with a week-long summer leadership academy for principals, assistant principals, coaches, and lead teachers. Another week of training in August focused both on the work of coaching and on the main shifts of the common standards.

During an intensive few days last fall, the school district's content experts immersed the new coaches in modeling lessons, writing coaching plans, and other work across the disciplines.

As the year began at her assigned school, Stuart-Hobson Middle School, Ms. Hawley worked with her instructional-coach supervisor, Abby Welsheimer, to learn how to structure her six- to eight-week coaching cycles, give feedback to teachers after observations, and master other skills required in her new role.

Ms. Hawley says her first year as a coach has been both harrowing and rewarding.

"It was pretty tough at the beginning of the year to balance everything," she says, noting that in addition to being Stuart-Hobson's coach, she is also its testing coordina-

tor. That means she oversees the immensely detailed logistics of administering accountability tests at the end of the year, as well as interim tests every six to eight weeks.

Managing all that at the same time as producing coaching plans and coaching calendars, working with teachers, and meeting with the principal and assistant principals often kept her at school late into the evening during the first semester. And, she admits, it reduced her to tears a few times.

It has been tough, also, to coach for the new common standards while she and the teachers are in the process of learning them, she says. She feels that the support and coaching she has received—and continues to receive by working with Ms. Welsheimer and getting periodic district-provided professional development—has been sufficient.

But "a lot of the stuff is just stuff you have to learn by doing," Ms. Hawley says, so it's a work in progress.

As the year concluded, she felt calmer about juggling her many duties: "Every [coaching] cycle, I feel more confident."

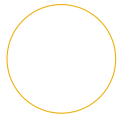
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“

I saw that I could make my school the kind of place where students could learn. I felt ready to leave the classroom by then, and I was starting to think about moving more into some kind of leadership role.”

**SARAH HAWLEY**

Instructional Coach, Stuart-Hobson Middle School, District of Columbia



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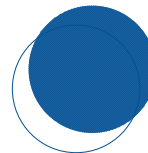
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# Turning Teachers Into Coaches

**The Literacy Collaborative's coaching-based program offers lessons on reading instruction and professional-development design.**

By Anthony Reboria

**T**he literature on teacher professional development stresses a number of the same points time and again. To be effective, experts say, teacher learning should be closely integrated with curriculum and educators' actual work in the classroom. It should be continuous and sustained over long periods. It should focus on evidence of student progress. And it should foster collaboration among faculty members and incorporate teachers' own expertise.

Whether the most real-life school PD programs meet those criteria is questionable at best, as the research also makes clear. But a number of initiatives have gained recognition for moving in the prescribed direction and illustrating some of the payoffs and challenges that can entail for schools. One example is the Literacy Collaborative, a coaching-based school-improvement model jointly run by the Ohio State and Lesley universities.

The Literacy Collaborative was started in 1993 by literacy-education scholars—and former teachers—Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell. It currently operates in some 300 schools nationwide, offering separate instructional programs for primary, elementary, and middle school levels.

## Framework-Driven

Pedagogically, the program has its roots in the work of Marie Clay, the founder of the Reading Recovery intervention program. Clay, a New Zealand-born developmental psychologist and education researcher, stressed the importance of closely analyzing and documenting students' individual progress in reading. In building on her approach, the Literacy Collaborative aims to give schools the expertise needed "to turn teachers into systematic observers of reading and writing behaviors," says Fountas, now the director of the Center for Reading

Recovery & Literacy Collaborative at Lesley University. The program fosters "precision teaching," she adds.

In recent years, the Literacy Collaborative has acquired an impressive research profile. Most prominently, a recently published longitudinal study by researchers at Stanford University found that the program boosted primary-grade students' reading skills by an average of 32 percent over three years. Other studies have tied the Literacy Collaborative to standardized test-score gains (including among English-language learners), advances in student writing skills, improvements in instructional quality, and positive changes in both teachers' and students' perspectives on literacy instruction. (Despite its record, the program is not included in the U.S. Department of Education's What Works Clearing-

reading experiences, targeted vocabulary and phonics lessons, guided reading and writing exercises, and independent work.

The program also places a strong emphasis on ongoing in-class assessment. To monitor students' progress in reading, Literacy Collaborative teachers regularly—as often as daily—take "running records," in which they listen to students read short passages and document where they need improvement. In addition, teachers use a leveled-text system to benchmark students' development against expectations and norms. Both methods are "directly linked to instruction," Fountas emphasizes.

## Building In-School Capacity

But where the Literacy Collaborative really differs from other school-improvement programs—and where it harbors lessons on PD design—is in its coaching model. All schools using the Literacy Collaborative are required to have an in-school literacy coach—and the title is not just ceremonial.

**“ This is the kind of change that is created from the bottom up. Teachers and coaches need to be supported. Principals need to create a culture where coaches' voices are heard.”**

**JODI BURROUGHS**

Principal, Dr. Martin Luther King Elementary School, Atlantic City, N.J.

house. According to Fountas, that's because it has not had the required number of randomized control-group studies.)

As an instructional program, the Literacy Collaborative is oriented around intensive lessons and purposeful teacher-student interactions. Its framework requires schools to schedule daily 2½ hour literacy blocks, with the time divided between word-study instruction and reading and writing workshops. Employing both whole-class and small-group instruction, teachers engage students in a selection of specified activities, including interactive read-alouds, shared-

Coaches, who are generally given reduced teaching loads, receive more than a year of graduate-level training from the Literacy Collaborative staff before the program is even implemented in their schools. That includes a four-week summer institute and some 300 hours of blended face-to-face and online learning. Once the program is in place in classrooms, coaches continue to receive ongoing support from Literacy Collaborative liaisons, including regularly scheduled site visits and training sessions.

The coaches, in turn, provide continuous training on the Literacy Collaborative



framework to their fellow classroom teachers. They facilitate twice-monthly PD sessions, observe classroom lessons, and meet with teachers one-on-one to refine their practice. According to the Literacy Collaborative's documentation, teachers are required to receive a total of 60 hours of outside-of-class professional development from their coaches during the first two years of implementation and 10 hours in each year thereafter.

Most PD in schools is based on the visiting "consultant model," Fountas observes. "We do the opposite. We try to build high-level capacity within the school itself."

Educators involved in the Literacy Collaborative program say that emphasis on developing in-school expertise helps foster instructional coherence and focus.

"Before we'd just have someone come in and do a workshop and then leave," says Karen Rood, the literacy coordinator at Caryl E. Adams Primary School in Whitney Point, N.Y., which has been using the Literacy Collaborative model for three years. "Now I support our teachers in the classroom, so there's follow-up."

"People have become more purposeful about teaching reading and writing. Before, we were all over the board," she says.

Jodi Burroughs, the principal of Dr. Martin Luther King Elementary School in Atlantic City, N.J., says that the Literacy Collaborative's strength is that it facilitates "embedded PD"—that is, training that is integrated into teachers' daily instructional practice.

Burroughs' school has been using the Literacy Collaborative since 2004, and she herself was trained as a coach in a previous position. Most teachers, she notes, are distrustful of new programs, because they see so many come and go. But by fostering interaction and a sense of ownership among teachers, the Literacy Collaborative becomes part of a school's instructional culture. Teachers see that "this is not just a program—it's about working on best practices for teaching," she says.

### 'Contextual' Challenges

But if the Literacy Collaborative's interwoven training structure offers instructional rewards, it also poses unique implementation challenges.

For one thing, the program is highly demanding on teachers. "During the first year, teachers tended to be overwhelmed by all the new information, as we [coaches] were during the training," Rood recalls. Teachers and coaches, she suggests, need to be prepared to devote significant time and attention to reorganizing their classroom routines around the new framework.

Kate Rodriguez, who is in her second year as a literacy coach at Monhagen Middle School in Middletown, N.Y., notes that the program can also give rise to interpersonal challenges for coaches, who have to learn "to walk the fine line" between instructor and peer. Especially at the outset, she says, coaches can feel as though they are caught "in the middle" between being a supporter and an evaluator.

Burroughs, the Atlantic City principal, cautions that the Literacy Collaborative's approach may also clash with school cultural norms, particularly in places where decision-making is typically hierarchical. "This is the kind of change that is created from the bottom up," she emphasizes. "Teachers and coaches need to be supported. Principals need to create a culture where coaches' voices are heard."

That observation is not merely anecdotal. The Stanford evaluation of the Literacy Collaborative found that fidelity to the program's coaching model—and the resulting impact on student progress—varied widely among participating schools. The researchers attributed the variances to, among other "contextual conditions," differing levels of teacher and school commitment and "perceived leadership support." They also found that "more coaching occurred in schools where teachers reported greater control over school-wide decisions affecting their work."

Lastly, there is the issue of cost. The Literacy Collaborative exemplifies the reality that, despite the proliferation of free resources on the Internet, intensive PD isn't necessarily cheap. Schools pay approximately \$25,000 over three years to implement the Literacy Collaborative, with most of that amount going toward the coach's training. Fountas notes, however, that the organization tries to find funders to provide scholarships for resource-strapped schools.

For Burroughs, whose school found grant funding to pay for the program, the price is worth it because students have shown solid improvement and it "is ultimately an investment in teaching."

Teachers seem to agree.

"I've been teaching reading for nine years," says Rodriguez. "This is the happiest I've been."

Rood is even more emphatic. "It literally changed my life," she says. Before her school started with the Literacy Collaborative and tapped her as a coach, she explains, she was on the verge of retiring from teaching. "But now I'm not looking at that any time soon."



Before we'd just have someone come in and do a workshop and then leave. Now I support our teachers in the classroom, so there's follow-up. People have become more purposeful about teaching reading and writing. Before, we were all over the board."

**KAREN ROOD**

Literacy Coordinator,  
Caryl E. Adams Primary School,  
Whitney Point, N.Y.

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## COMMENTARY

# Critical Friends: The Benefits of Instructional Coaches

By Peter DeWitt

**“Instructional coaches are onsite professional developers who work collaboratively with teachers, empowering them to incorporate research-based instructional methods into their classrooms.”** – Jim Knight

Relationships matter in education. Quite honestly, they matter in every profession. Educators work for many years with most of the same colleagues, and often teach sibling after sibling. Bill Daggett, the Founder and Chairman of the International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE), has always made relationships a focus of his presentations and core mission.

The reality is that without fostering positive relationships, we don't grow as professionals. In an interview, he said, “ICLE looked at the nation's most rapidly improving schools in a five year initiative with Council of Chief State School Officers. We found that they evaluate students and staff around four different learning criteria—and relationships are essential to those learning criteria.”

If we look at our own experiences as teachers and principals, we know relationships are one of the most important things we leave with at the end of a career. We all work with colleagues who are also trusted friends. We have parents who we hear from that no longer have children in our schools. They send an e-mail or find us on Facebook in an effort to maintain a connection.

If relationships didn't matter, social networking would not be as important to our lives as it is today. People are on Facebook and Twitter to maintain connections with old friends and family, but also with new colleagues in their personal learning network. One new relationship that matters in schools is that of instructional coaches and the teachers they serve.

Instructional coaches seem to be a new phenomenon in schools. Their job is to help educators become better teachers. They

observe teachers teaching, go over instructional data, and model good teaching practices. As much as this may be new for schools, the core of instructional coaching has been around for a long time.

## Critical Friends

When I was a new teacher, I taught 30 first graders in a city school. I had a high quality student teaching experience, countless hours of observations, and a good network of friends to help me maintain my sanity. However, as I look back now, I could not have made it through that first few years without the help of my colleagues.

I was the general education teacher, Jo was the speech pathologist who serviced the students, and Anna was the special education teacher who worked with me. We co-taught and I learned a great deal from the two of them. I was from upstate New York and I thought I was teaching in a huge city school in Poughkeepsie, and Anna, who was from the Bronx, felt otherwise. The school seemed more suburban to her.

Over the few years I worked with Jo and Anna, I learned a lot. Not just about special education students but about good teaching practices that were good for all students. They watched and intervened, and we met during lunch and after school. Not because we had to but because we wanted to. I became a better teacher because of their input.

Instructional coaching, when done correctly, does the same thing. Consultant, educator, and leadership expert Jim Knight has done a great deal of work around instructional coaching. In a study with the University of Kansas, Knight studied the

impact of instructional coaches. Knight says, “Instructional coaches are onsite professional developers who work collaboratively with teachers, empowering them to incorporate research-based instructional methods into their classrooms.”

Knight says instructional coaches employ the following seven practices:

- **Enrolls the teacher:** He or she conducts one-to-one interviews with each teacher prior to the experience.
- **Engages in collaborative planning:** The coach meets with the collaborating teacher to discuss how a new teaching practice can be implemented effectively.
- **Models the lesson:** The coach must model the lesson in the collaborating teacher's classroom while the teacher observes.
- **Lends post conference:** Both parties must meet to discuss what the teacher observed the coach doing while modeling the lesson.
- **Observes the lesson:** It's the teacher's turn to teach the lesson.
- **Explores data together:** The coach and teacher discuss the data gathered during mutual observations.
- **Provides continued support:** This is a continuous relationship that needs to be fostered over the year.

In addition, according to Knight, instructional coaches are grounded in the following seven principles:

- **Equality:** Instructional coaches and teachers are equal partners.

- **Choice:** Teachers should have a choice regarding what and how they learn.
- **Voice:** Professional learning should empower and respect the voices of teachers.
- **Dialogue:** Professional learning should enable authentic dialogue.
- **Reflection:** Reflection is an integral part of professional learning.
- **Praxis:** Teachers should apply their learning to their real-life practice as they are learning.
- **Reciprocity:** Instructional coaches should expect to get as much as they give.

Knight says, “A coach is a trusted friend to educators, a colleague, a sounding board, and a witness to the good. These days can be difficult for educators, with increased expectations, decreased funding, more pressure and less encouragement. Coaches provide an incredibly important service by listening, empathizing, and encouraging their colleagues respectfully and non-judgmentally.”

Over the years, we have sometimes called them critical friends, while at other times we have been blessed with great co-teachers who have helped us along the way. A partner that helps us become a better educator is an invaluable relationship. Jim Knight’s research on instructional coaches really provides a framework to help school districts establish a high-quality instructional coach approach. However, it also helps the co-teaching and critical-friend process as well.

*Published February 16, 2011, in Education Week Teacher*

## COMMENTARY

# Coaching Teachers: What You Need to Know

By Elena Aguilar

A major study suggests that putting literacy coaches in schools can help boost students’ reading skills by as much as 32 percent over three years. This four-year, nationwide research project affirmed what many of us who have been coached—or who are coaches—know: Instructional coaching works.

Or rather, it *can* work if the conditions are right.

In 2005, I began coaching at the school where I was then teaching. I coached and taught for three years, and then became a full-time instructional coach at another middle school. I’d like to share some of the things I’ve learned about instructional coaching, with the hope that these insights might be helpful to those who have recently become coaches or who are considering doing so.

An alternate title for this piece could be, “If Only I Had Known.”

**Coaching is really, really hard.** This lesson came fast. Most coaches receive no preparation; it’s still rare to find classes to take or credentials to pursue, and not much is written about the practice. I’ve seen many strong teachers plucked out of classrooms and catapulted into coaching; but an effective teacher of children isn’t automatically effective at leading adults through learning. There are a whole slew of new skills and a pile of knowledge that coaches need. Furthermore, coaching grown-ups is often not as much fun—and not as immediately rewarding—as working with children.

**Coaches need training and on-going professional development.** There is so much a coach needs to know: how to observe instruction, give feedback to teachers, model and debrief lessons, facilitate meetings, and present information. Coaches also need to know a lot about how adults learn and they

need to be exceptional communicators. Of course, these skills rest on top of a deep understanding of instructional strategies and content.

I had a tremendous amount to learn regarding the craft of coaching and its different approaches. I had to become much more knowledgeable about adult learning theory, change management, group dynamics, emotional intelligence, and cultural proficiency. I also had to closely examine my assumptions and beliefs about teachers (new teachers, ineffective teachers, and veteran teachers) and about how our education system can change.

I did a lot of reading, attended some trainings, and talked to every coach I met about the practice. But I probably learned the most about coaching during a year in which, while working as a coach, I *had* a coach. That was a profound lesson: coaches need coaches. It is the optimal professional development.

**The “why” for coaching must be made very clear by the principal.** Every school could benefit from coaching, but the practice is not yet pervasive, and teachers frequently perceive coaching as something that happens when you’re new or failing. Coaches are increasingly brought into schools that are struggling, sometimes as part of an improvement plan—a situation that increases the likelihood of resistance.

Coaching should be presented by the principal as an “effectiveness builder,” not a deficit-filler. A coach’s work should be aligned with the school’s goals, and also needs to be shaped by the teacher—from what he/she wants support around. But it’s critical that the principal articulates why a coach was hired, what the coach is supposed to do, and how teachers are expected to work with the coach. When the “why” for coaching is vague, the coach’s impact will be limited.

**The “what” of coaching also needs articulation.** A coach’s roles and responsibilities need to be created (or co-created with the administration) and then shared with teachers and staff members. If not,

## Additional Reading on Instructional Coaching ►

### **BLENDED COACHING**

By Bloom, Castagna, Moir,  
Warren, 2005

### **THE LITERACY COACH'S SURVIVAL GUIDE**

By Cathy Toll, 2005

### **RESPONSIVE LITERACY COACHING**

By Cheryl Dozier, 2006

### **MASTERFUL COACHING**

By Robert Hargrove, 2008

### **CULTURALLY PROFICIENT COACHING**

By Lindsey, Martinez,  
and Lindsey, 2006

coaches are likely to be asked, “What exactly do you do?” and then asked to make photocopies, sub for absent teachers, put up bulletin boards, and so on.

The reality in under-resourced schools is that coaches are often used in many ways. We may pull students for intervention or diagnostic testing, gather and analyze data, compile resources for parents, or even put up bulletin boards. But it is imperative that when a coach is working individually with a teacher that there be a clear definition of what that work is and that everyone understands when “coaching” is taking place.

**So what is coaching?** Essentially, coaching is a process that can move a person from where he or she is to where he or she wants to be. A coach needs to “enroll” a teacher—to get that person brought into the process. *A teacher has to want it.* This must be said because coaching cannot be mandated (principals may need to be reminded of this at times). Once the teacher has been enrolled, the coach should help determine goals for practice. The coach’s eyes remain on the prize, as we guide the teacher and carve out reflective moments along the way. The coach helps the teacher see where he or she is being effective and why, and points out all the indicators that help reach their goals. Along the way, coaches provide emotional support for what is often an arduous journey.

**Coaching is about listening.** I often think of coaching as something that takes place primarily in conversations, perhaps about a lesson plan or an issue that arises in class or in response to a coach’s observation. I’d argue that a coach needs to be an expert at listening: It is this skill which we must excel at more than any other. We must hear what is said and not said, what is implied and unasked. From our listening, we form questions that have the potential to dramatically shift teacher be-

liefs, thinking, and practice.

**Effective coaches aren’t over-directive.** As a coach, there’s sometimes a temptation to take over and direct the ship. But we need to be very careful because ultimately we want the teachers we coach to be able to solve their own problems. Sometimes—depending on their level of knowledge, skill, and capacity—a teacher needs a coach to be instructive. But an effective coach is acutely aware of a teacher’s zone of proximal development and of the gradual release of responsibility. Our coaching is always in response to where someone is and where they want to be and not directed by our own ideas about where we think they should be.

**“Without trust there can be no coaching,”** write Rafael Echeverría and Julio Olalla in *The Art of Ontological Coaching*. While this is undeniable, it also presents a tricky conundrum that must be addressed. A principal may see the coach as part of and accountable to the administration. Yet in order for coaching to be effective, teachers need to be able to completely trust a coach and know that what is said and observed will not be repeated to the principal. A coach and teacher could share their goals with the principal and report on progress toward those goals, but that might be all. The critical factor is that everyone is very clear on what information is being shared with whom. Then it’s up to the coach to create and maintain a trusting relationship with a teacher.

**Coaching can be transformative.** I coach because I want to see massive improvements in the outcomes and experiences for children in our schools. As a classroom teacher, I could influence 50 kids a year. As a coach, working with teachers, my work has impacted hundreds of students. Now, I also coach principals. I like thinking about the numbers, knowing that I can possibly change the lives of thousands of

students for the better.

But I also do this work because I know how desperately teachers and principals need support. I became a coach, in part, because as a teacher I had a phenomenal coach. Had it not been for her, I might have left the profession. I know that if teachers and principals are engaged in truly learner-directed professional development, they can be more effective in their jobs and feel better about them, and all kids will benefit.

I’m starting to see the impact of my coaching, and I would dare to say that in some instances it has been transformative. Our education system is deeply flawed and seriously broken in places, but *it is fixable*. In order to repair it, we need to pay attention to every part and every person. Coaching is a way to heal and transform our public schools.

*Elena Aguilar has taught elementary, middle, and high school, and is currently a School Improvement Coach in the Oakland Unified School District.*



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## COMMENTARY

# Why We Need Teacher Leadership

By Doyle Nicholson

**T**raditionally, teacher effectiveness was confined to a single classroom and the 20 to 30 students within those walls. Teacher success was determined based on two or three classroom observations and, of course, student results on end-of-the-year assessments. Effective teachers had minimal impact outside their own classrooms and virtually no voice in forming educational policy.

But in order to maximize the abilities of these successful teachers, schools must change the traditional view of a classroom educator. Teachers who want to share their knowledge and leadership skills usually have to leave the classroom and take a position at the district office or as an administrator. But many of us have a desire to lead change but also keep one foot firmly in the classroom door. School systems need to find ways to create hybrid leadership roles in which teachers can be in the classroom part of the time, but also engage in instructional coaching or shared leadership the rest of the day or week.

Fortunately, attitudes are changing, and accomplished teachers are finding (and making) more opportunities to expand their expertise beyond the square footage allotted them in a school. My first exposure to this expanded idea of teachers' professional work came in 2004, shortly after achieving national-board certification. After receiving my certification I began facilitating national-board-candidate support sessions at the excellent North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching.

Then, in 2007, the Center for Teaching Quality (CTQ) teamed with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction to survey almost 1,400 teachers with national-board certification in math and science about their outlook on teacher leadership. A majority—including myself—indicated a desire to improve teaching and learning through actions taken outside the classroom. Like other expert teachers ready for leadership roles, we were no longer content with doing a good job in the classroom. We wanted to share our expertise with adult

learners in ways that can improve learning opportunities for all students.

There were a number of spinoffs from that initial survey. One of the most significant for me was an invitation to participate in CTQ's Return on Investment initiative in North Carolina as a "virtual coach." The two-year project capitalized on the power of the Internet to connect national-board-certified teachers in rural and high-needs schools.

### Virtual Leadership

I'll admit to some initial skepticism about how effectively I could help other teachers without face-to-face interactions. As a teacher, so much of what I do revolves around the relationship and trust that I build with my students. I wondered how I might cultivate that same rapport with teachers who lived and worked miles away. While the relationships took a little longer to create, I found I was able to get to know these colleagues, their personalities, and their teaching needs in detail through our interactions on webinars and in our online-community space. They appreciated our support and the opportunity to interact online—often in the comfort of their own homes when it was convenient for them.

After that experience, I was sold on the power and potential of a virtual learning community. And my work as a virtual coach has convinced me that my ultimate goal is to find a job that allows me to split my professional life evenly between regular work with students and other leadership roles in and out of my school.

### Empowering Effective Teachers

My energy and excitement for collaboration with my peers grew even more in May 2010 when CTQ hosted a North Carolina NBCT Summit. That's a significant undertaking in my state, where nearly 18,000 teachers have earned national-board certification over the past 15 years. Two things impressed me from the summit: (1) the number of teachers in attendance who voiced the same desire to share their educational know-how in collaborative ways; and (2) the sheer brainpower in

the room. Working in small and large groups, in a single day we were able to draw on our collective experience and expertise to craft promising solutions to some of education's biggest hindrances.

The conference addressed issues of teaching quality, student achievement, and school success common across America, including measuring teacher effectiveness; supporting new teachers; and creating the kind of job-embedded professional development that makes it possible for teachers to model and observe high-quality instruction.

I left feeling empowered and convinced that teachers have the ability to make great changes to the status-quo educational system. I also left a little disappointed that decisions about educational policy are so often left to career politicians and others outside the classroom. But I have hope that teacher-led enterprises like our virtual mentoring, the subsequent summit, and the many proactive initiatives now being started by teachers at the national, state and local levels signal the beginning of a new era when teacher voices will be routinely sought out—and heard—as policymakers, citizens, and educators work together to strengthen our public schools.

*Doyle Nicholson, an 18-year veteran, teaches mathematics at Mt. Tabor High School in Winston-Salem, N.C. He earned national-board certification in Adolescent and Young Adult Mathematics in 2004. His local leadership in mentoring novice teachers and national-board candidates earned him 2006 Teacher of the Year honors in the Yadkin County (N.C.) Schools.*

Published September 16, 2012, in *Education Week Teacher's The Art of Coaching Teachers Blog*

## COMMENTARY

# The Art of Coaching Teachers: “How Can I Keep Teachers Happy and Energized?”

By Elena Aguilar

Dear Coaches,

I received an email that pulled on my heart strings and gets to the essence of transformational coaching, the coaching model I practice. Here's what Meghan wrote:

*I'm entering my second year as an instructional coach at a turnaround school (year three) on the White Mountain Apache Reservation in Arizona. It is isolated, rural, and there are many issues with gangs, violence, health, and suicide.*

*The job, teachers, the students, and my principal are amazing. Whew, is this tough work, though. We have put many systems in place and it feels as though everything is beginning to tie together. Unfortunately, we received an “F” letter grade (one of seven AZ schools—six of which are on the reservation, five of which are middle schools), even though we grew in the AZ system and had a high “D”. Even though the law was enacted this past Spring, the state decided to use past years’ data to determine that we were an “F” school—schools automatically get an “F” after three years of underperforming or getting a “D”. We attempted repeal, even with the state rep. who monitors giving input, and we were not successful. More over,*

*the entire district is in it's third year for ELL corrective action and we are one out of four schools in turnaround.*

*Even though everything is “coming together”, we are exhausted, hopeful and face many challenges beyond our school walls. There is another coach at the school this year, specifically for math. I work with English / language arts a lot, with math and other content areas. We are well into implementing DDI, RTI, PLCs, formative assessment, and most all teachers are putting 100 percent effort in. Do you have any suggestions on how I can keep teachers happy and energized?*

*We all want so badly to receive a “C” from the state this year and show the world that our students are great!*

*Thanks for any feedback! And I appreciate your blog and communications on coaching.*

Dear Meghan,

Here in Oakland, I also support schools that are in a (state-mandated) process of transformation. While there's been a swell of excitement and energy, we work amidst an underlying anxiety that we aren't doing enough fast enough. It's an emotional roller coaster; this journey of school “reform,” “turnaround,” or “transformation,” punctuated by the harsh realities of our inner city: poverty, gangs, homelessness, unemployment, and so on.

Like you, I work with a school that has put so many structures in place, that has a fantastic teaching and administrative staff,

and that has great students! And yet, the numbers from last year's test scores still basically give us an “F.” There was growth but that's overshadowed by the “F”. I know we're not alone in feeling demoralized; I know that given the national education context, many teachers, principals and coaches share these frustrations. Given this current reality, what role can a coach play? What can we do, you ask, to help keep teachers energized?

One of the reasons I'm passionate about coaching is because I think we can do what no one else within a school is positioned to do—we can meet these needs, fill some holes, and provide the support to continue the struggle.

Here's what we can do:

1. **Coaches can hold the big-picture understanding that transformation will take a long time.** Some authorities say school transformation takes 3-5 years. I expect that we should see significant changes within that time frame, including a rise in test scores, graduation rates, and so on. But true transformation happens on the levels of individual behaviors, beliefs and ways of being. That could take more than three years. Real transformation will also require that we change many systems in education—we need to uproot

those that don't work and build others—and this will take more than five years, especially when we are talking about systems that have been inherently oppressive for a long time. Furthermore, in order for sustainable, systemic transformation to take place in schools, there will also need to be major changes on economic and political levels—we can't get around the fact that our schools need more money and that we service under-resourced communities. The big picture is complex and complicated; we keep it in mind so that we can remember that it's going to take more than five years to create the kinds of educational and life experiences that we envision for our students.

As coaches we can communicate this message to a variety of stakeholders, over and over: we need time, we need to honor the process, we need to slow down and listen to each other and make some decisions together. When I coach from a big picture perspective, holding an understanding of what it'll take to transform our schools, I encourage teachers to have a cup of tea and tell me a story about a recent success with a student.

- 2. Coaches can surface, highlight, and celebrate every single success.** We see the big picture and we look for every tiny indicator that we're going in the right direction. We need to help teachers and leaders recognize the micromovements every single day that are leading to transformation. This helps us do two things: we see that we're going in the right direction and we develop a narrative to counter the message of the "F"s.

Recognizing the micromovements implies that there's a shared vision and goal, that the goal is realistic and measurable, and that people are bought into it. Whether you work with a school, a department, or an individual teacher, your work will be most successful if it's anchored in a vision, a goal, and a plan to reach that goal. Then your coaching helps teachers make decisions towards the goals, and helps them see the steps along the way. And I really mean every tiny step.

Find the bright spots, the micromovements, the indicators of progress towards goals. Then coach teachers into recognizing every single indicator and into sharing them in various ways. By sharing, they begin to create a narrative within their community of the transformation they're engaged in. The scarlet "F" gets less attention when the other stories be-

come louder and more colorful.

- 3. We can coach for emotional resilience.** How we see the world, interpret past events, and identify our agency within change all impact our resilience (our ability to bounce back from setbacks). Coaches can lead others in reflective conversations to explore these beliefs and expand their resilience (*See Education Week Teacher, Jan. 5, 2011*).

### Do Not Despair

In order for us as coaches to support others in developing resilience, seeing every tiny step towards growth or success, and maintaining a big picture awareness, we need to make sure we're engaging in these practices ourselves. What do you do, Meghan—and other readers—to boost your resilience? What helps you maintain your energy, hope, or even faith that we can transform our schools and that educational experiences and outcomes for kids can improve? And, what little actions did you take today, yesterday, or last week that positively impacted the practices of teachers, and perhaps the experience of their students? What are the micromovements in your own coaching practice that if continued, refined, and repeated could lead to something transformational?

One thing that's helped me boost my resilience is to read and learn from leaders who have participated in monumental struggles. I find consolation in the Dalai Lama's advice: "Do not despair," he counseled a group of impatient activists some years ago. "Your work will bear fruit in 700 years or so." This reminder keeps me going day after day, year after year. "Seven hundred years," I tell myself.

I also recognize that I have no choice but to engage in this process of transformation. The sages who wrote the Talmud declared, "It is not up to you to finish the work, but neither are you free not to take it up." This is what gets me up in the morning.

**DISTRICT & SCHOOL  
IMPROVEMENT** Center

at American Institutes for Research ■

# Better Teaching With Coaching

## How Instructional Support Builds Classroom Capacity and Student Success

Teachers matter. We know this intuitively. We know this experientially. And, we know this empirically. Extensive research studies show that teacher effectiveness is the dominant school-based factor affecting student learning.

Federal Race to the Top reform initiatives highlight teacher effectiveness, changing not only the focus and direction of local, state, and national policy discussions, but also driving the need for highly effective on-the-job professional development. School districts across the nation are eager to improve teacher practice in schools identified as chronically low performing. Research-based instructional coaching can be an effective strategy for improving teacher growth and student achievement.

A national leader in district and school improvement, American Institutes for Research (AIR) provides research, assessment, evaluation, and technical assistance to ensure that all students have access to a high-quality education. AIR's unique system of instructional coaching for schools and school districts translates research into effective classroom practice and enables teachers to take incremental, targeted actions that directly boost student learning and create pathways for success.



### Instructional Coaching in Action

At **Jefferson-Houston School**, a PK–8 school in Alexandria, Virginia, school turnaround is gaining momentum. After a long history of struggle and failing test scores, Jefferson-Houston posted 21 percent gains in mathematics and 20 percent gains in science on the statewide assessment in 2012–13.

The difference, Principal Rosalyn Rice-Harris said, is continuous improvement and transparency. Every week, she and her two coaches, in partnership with AIR, worked to quantify their impact, supporting high-leverage mathematics strategies teachers use in their classrooms and connecting implementation data to increases in student proficiency on common assessments. “Showing data on a constant basis inclined teachers to do more and get more involved in coaching,” Rice-Harris said.

Eager to learn from others, teachers at Jefferson-Houston frequently used smart tablets to record a colleague's practice, seeing for themselves how to implement an effective mathematics strategy and planning with their coach to better meet their own classroom needs. According to one teacher, “Coaches are an amazing part of our collaboration and teaching experience.” In time, promising practices were encouraged in all content areas.

Building a culture of trust and demonstrating her commitment to deepening the understanding of all learners, young and old, meant Principal Rice-Harris worked alongside her teachers and engaged with her school leadership team in weekly problem solving. “We believe everyone wants to do well,” she told her teachers and staff. “Our job is to help you.”

“Coaching,” she added, “leaves you with a sense of accomplishment for refining your craft and gives you a wealth of knowledge to share with others.”

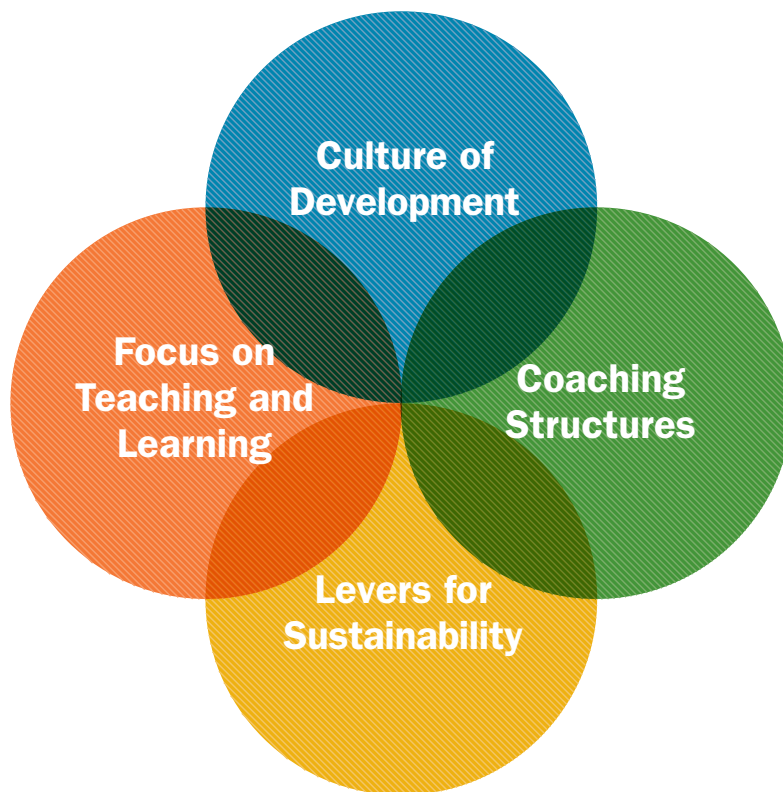


## Essential Elements for Instructional Coaching

Rooted in the theory of continuous improvement, AIR instructional coaching services embody the belief that progress and growth are always possible and that the strategies for improving teaching and learning need to be continually enhanced and refined to meet a wide array of student needs.

Research shows that the traditional, stand-alone model of professional development does not influence teacher practice—but instructional coaching does. Week after week, classroom after classroom, with an individual teacher or a collaborative group, coaching offers *multiple* avenues to provide sustained, job-embedded feedback that spurs teacher growth and builds collective action toward attaining improved student outcomes.

### Essential Elements for Instructional Coaching Success



#### The Coaching Tracking Tool

To measure the impact of instructional coaching, AIR developed the Coaching Tracking Tool. This unique computer-based tool gathers data on distinct coaching events, from observations and debriefs to modeling lessons, from data meetings to school leadership teams, from lesson planning to professional book studies. Every learning objective, teaching standard, action step, and outcome of a coaching interaction, as well as the frequency and duration, are monitored. Ongoing analysis of data enables AIR and district and school stakeholders to quickly identify areas of strategic growth and further propel the continuous improvement of all teachers.

### AIR instructional coaching services focus on the essential elements that deepen and sustain teacher and student engagement in learning:

#### Culture of Development

AIR's model for instructional coaching focuses on establishing a broadly shared definition of excellent teaching grounded in professional teaching standards. We work with district and school leaders to align professional development and evaluation, supporting teacher practice and improving student outcomes.

#### Focus on Teaching and Learning

AIR trains coaches and school leaders on the use of data to support coach and teacher decisions. Trained coaches lead substantive conversations about pedagogy, beliefs, and assumptions regarding teaching and learning and collaborate to identify next steps and action plans. An AIR expert supervises instructional coaches at each school and monitors coaching effectiveness through an online database and surveys conducted three times a year.

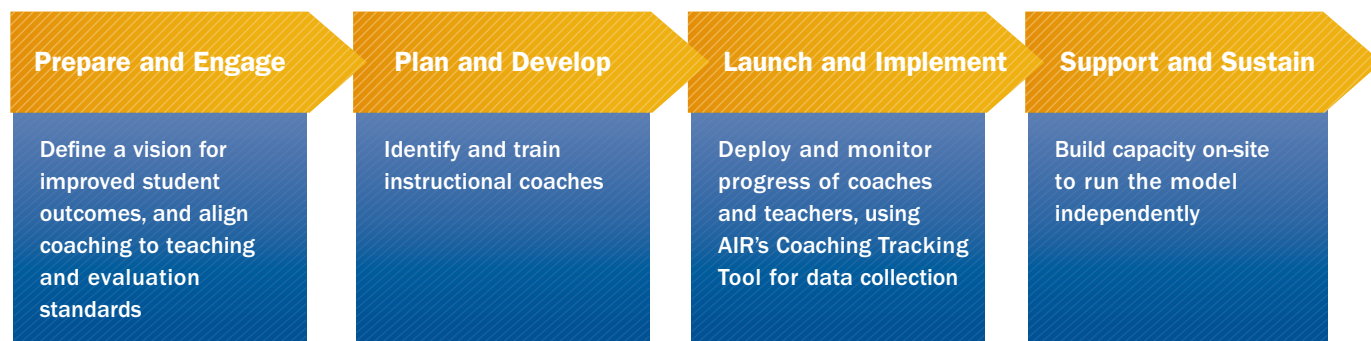
#### Coaching Structures

AIR supports districts and schools in determining the coaching structures that best fit their needs and capacity. We help to clarify roles, responsibilities, and expectations of all stakeholders at every level. At the launch of the program, AIR sets up the online Coaching Tracking Tool to monitor data and train coaches and school leaders to identify metrics for success. An AIR expert provides coaching support through frequent on-site visits and training throughout the implementation.

#### Levers for Sustainability

AIR's model focuses on capacity building and sustainability. We provide technical and professional assistance to districts and schools as they establish structures, systems, and practices that enable them to identify and train coaches, use data to drive activities and assignments, allocate resources (e.g., staff, time, budget) for coaching, and determine ongoing development.

After an initial needs assessment, AIR develops a customized implementation path for school districts and schools:



### Recommendations

Teachers who believe that they are being supported and fostered by instructional coaches create more successful learning pathways and opportunities for their students.

Some schools, such as Eisenhower, want to design and launch a new coaching model. Other schools, such as Jefferson-Houston, wish to deepen and enhance their existing program. AIR is adept at both.

Together with AIR, school districts and schools can build their own success stories by working to create and implement:

- A vision of high-quality instructional coaching for all teachers
- A culture that fosters trust and continuous improvement
- An unshakable focus on instruction, pedagogy, and data-informed decision making
- Well-defined roles and expectations for teachers, coaches, and administrators
- Transparent communication and ongoing examination of indicators of success

So, how do we reach more teachers with instructional coaching? We continually provide them with the support they need to grow and develop. AIR's instructional coaching services enable school districts and schools to build the systems and the expertise to improve teacher effectiveness and transform student performance.

For more information and a list of AIR services, visit [www.REVIVINGSCHOOLS.org](http://www.REVIVINGSCHOOLS.org)

Getting feedback on my teaching on a regular basis is very helpful to me.

Teacher,  
Eisenhower High School



### Instructional Coaching in Action

In a small city three hours south of Chicago, **Eisenhower High School** serves 1,000 students in the Decatur Public School District. Graduation rates hover near 80 percent, but significant achievement gaps exist between white students (roughly 45 percent of the student body) and African American students (47 percent). A recipient of federal school improvement funds, Eisenhower launched instructional coaching midyear, in 2011–12.

Four content-area coaches, trained by AIR, supported Eisenhower core teachers by asking questions specific to the teachers' practices and student data and by guiding teachers to better understand what works and why. "Getting feedback on my teaching on a regular basis is very helpful to me," noted one teacher. "My coach has a wealth of knowledge in content and delivery of content."

In 2012–13, Eisenhower coaches logged close to 1,400 unique coaching interactions, using the AIR Coaching Tracking Tool to gather data and inform coaching decisions. All four coaches focused unwaveringly on three teaching standards: instructional delivery, student success, and sustained engagement, as defined by a researched-based observation tool.

Comparing observation data from September 2011 (precoaching) to March 2013, the greatest instructional gains observed in Eisenhower classrooms included:

- Articulating clear and consistent learning targets
- Using multiple methods to present information
- Increasing opportunities for student autonomy and leadership
- Facilitating meaningful peer interactions related to learning content
- Reducing lesson transition time



Published June 6, 2013, in *Education Week Teacher*

## CHAT

# Harnessing the Potential of Instructional Coaching

On June 6, 2013, Elena Aguilar answered readers' question on instructional coaching. The following is an excerpt from the chat. To read the transcript in full, visit: <http://www.edweek.org/tm/section/chat/2013/06/06/index.html>.

**ELENA AGUILAR** is an instructional and leadership coach in the Oakland Unified School District in California and the author of *The Art of Coaching: Effective Strategies for School Transformation*.

**Q** When you think about your typical day as a coach, what kinds of tasks would you be doing?

**AGUILAR:** A typical day consists of meeting with a coachee for conversation, observing a coachee, sharing the data that was gathered, and some reflective time—perhaps writing time—for the coach. We need to process what we experience and do, and reflect on how our work is leading to changes in teacher practice. Coaches can also play key roles in facilitating teams, so a typical day might also include facilitating a team (say a 7th grade team of teachers, or an ELA department) in an inquiry cycle around their practice. Finally, I think coaches get a great deal out of spending part of their day expanding their knowledge and skill sets—reading professional literature, collaborating with colleagues, analyzing data, etc.

**Q** How do you schedule one-on-one time with very busy teachers, especially those with family obligations that make them leave right after school and tons of extra responsibilities that take up their conference periods?

**AGUILAR:** This implies an inquiry into the systems at the school—and it necessitates an inquiry into the conditions that allow for effective coaching. An effective coaching program prioritizes resources (like time) in order for a teacher to meet with a coach. It's a conversation to have with an administrator about creating the time for a teacher to engage in coaching. Time is a

very real beast. We need to take it on, by the horns, and not let it be an excuse. What we prioritize gets done. So let's prioritize coaching.

**Q** How do we begin to reach out to teachers who have the mindset, "You can't tell me how to teach?"

**AGUILAR:** There are lots of "resistant" teachers out there. This is a big topic, and there's so much to say about it. First thing is to take apart what "resistant" means. I'd respond to these teachers with something along the lines of, "I don't want to tell you how to teach. I want to have some conversations about teaching with you. I want to listen to you reflect on your teaching."

**Q** What are some effective ways to assess the impact of coaching on teacher practice?

**AGUILAR:** It is the essential question about coaching, for me anyway because this is a question about the value of coaching. Coaches (and those who manage and direct them) need to be thinking in this way—thinking about designing ways for coaches to work that help us elicit this data. The next step of course is how do we link the impact of coaching to student experience and outcomes? Effective coaching changes teacher practice which improves student outcomes. In order to assess the impact of coaching on teacher practice, the work that coach and coachee do together needs to be sharply defined and agreed on. I believe that all coaches should work from work plans—plans that include goals and strategic actions and theories of action and such. This helps to narrow and define what happens when coach and coachee meet. And it gives us a clear place to look for evidence of impact. So for example, perhaps the teacher wants to work in the use of formative assessment. That is clear and measurable.

**Q** What about coaching off-site using technology, like Skype, bug-in-the ear,

etc. Do you have data regarding the efficacy of off-site vs. on-site coaching? If you have found it effective, what technology works the best? Is it important to have developed an in-person relationship prior to using technology for coaching?

**AGUILAR:** I'm a strong believer in one-on-one conversations, the kind where you look someone in the eyes and you notice the tension drop from their jaw and you see the deep sighs—expressions when they come to a realization. If a coaching relationship is ever going to be digital, or to use technology, I think it's imperative that a strong in-person relationship already be established. I don't know how I'd coach without all the non-verbal communication I observe. So many of the people I coach, express themselves non-verbally. Those are critical cues for me. I have used a "bug-in-the-ear" strategy for in the moment feedback and that was really powerful. I think it's critical that teachers get in-the-moment feedback actually, and if they really trust you and you're in the back of the room and you'll debrief in person afterwards, then I think it's great.

**Q** What might be your biggest 'go-to' point in order to convince a district to create an instructional coaching position?

**AGUILAR:** My "go-to" point would be: "Is what you're doing working for your students right now?" Are your teachers loving their jobs, excited to come to work, and staying in your district for many years? Is their practice improving? Are they meeting the needs that our students are showing up with? (Even if those needs are challenging). I'd push on this, drive in that point: "Is this working?" Are you seeing what you want to see from your teachers, leaders, students? And if not, then let's explore what coaching can do. It's a way for us to learn.

**Q School board members, like administrators, seem to love data. What data can you give school board members about the value of coaching?**

AGUILAR: I think we need to shift this conversation also, to broaden their understanding of what data is, and what data is valuable. There are some studies that have recently come out that demonstrate the impact of coaching. The Penn. Institute for Instructional Coaching released a report earlier this year that shows some powerful data of the impact of coaching over three years. We need to seek out and gather this data and then share it, as well as data from our schools and districts that shows the need for teachers to improve their practice and continue learning. I think some of the most interesting research is around how adults learn, and the brain science behind our learning needs. For example, those amazing brain scientists have all kinds of data about what our brains need in order to feel safe to be able to take risks and learn—the kind of emotional safety we need. We can't keep ignoring this data. We can't expect to continue yelling at teachers and telling them that it's their fault that students aren't performing and expect them to want to learn and grow. Teachers are responsible for everything wrong in a community, for the "failure" of schools and kids and so on. If we want teachers to show up as learners, willing to reflect on their practice and look at data, then we need to find ways to make them feel safe. We need to listen and look them in the eyes and listen and listen and listen. And then we can ask some harder questions and provide feedback. That's the research I think we should all be reading and learning more deeply (at least I want to) and that we could use more strategically in trying to convince others of the need for coaching.

**Q How do you suggest we build capacity for our coaches to have courageous conversations with their peers? Or how do we take relationships from collegial to collaborative?**

AGUILAR: I'm so glad you ask about building capacity for coaches—that's essential. Most of us don't enter a coaching role knowing how to do these things. We need professional development! We need to engage in inquiry cycles with each other, in observation of each other, we need to learn more about communication. The "how" is out there; it's when and where does this happen that we need to talk about and advocate for.

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**North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teaching**

<http://www.nccat.org/s/1099/start.aspx>

**Pennsylvania Institute for Instructional Coaching**

<http://www.pacoaching.org>

**Studying the Impact of Instructional Coaching**

<http://instructionalcoach.org/research/tools/paper-studying-the-impact-of-instructional-coaching>

*Jim Knight, Jake Cornett*

The University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning, 2008

**Teaching and Teaching Effectiveness: A Bold Review From National Board Certified Teachers in North Carolina**

<http://166.78.18.218/content/teachers-and-teaching-effectiveness-bold-view-national-board-certified-teachers-north>

*Ann Byrd, Melissa Rasberry*

Center for Teaching Quality, January 2011

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